

# UNITED IN DIVERSITY?

## CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE IMAGE OF A COMMON EUROPEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

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**ABSTRACT** - *This paper discusses the European Heritage Label scheme as a contemporary example of creating an image of Europe as a cultural entity. It reflects upon the notion of a European cultural heritage as the basis for a common European identity. The analysis focuses on the link between identity and cultural heritage and the process of constructing a common cultural heritage for Europe, closely linked to its institutionalisation. It invites the consideration of the exclusive character of the official EU-initiative of the European Heritage Label critically and asks whether, with regard to creating a European identity, a more coherent image is at all required, or how coherent an image of a common European cultural heritage would need to be.*

### INTRODUCTION

1. European Union, preamble to *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (Brussels, 2007), Art. 1.8, 'Symbols'

2. "The Symbols of the EU: United in Diversity", European Union, accessed August 31, 2012, [http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/motto/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/motto/index_en.htm)

'United in diversity' is the motto of the European Union (EU) and as an official symbol of the Union it is also included in the so-called Lisbon Treaty.<sup>1</sup> "The motto means that, via the EU, Europeans are united in working together for peace and prosperity, and that the many different cultures, traditions and languages in Europe are a positive asset for the continent."<sup>2</sup> Still, with currently 27 member states, the European Union is not Europe and Europe is not the European Union. In a most basic distinction, the EU is a political

body, whereas Europe is a continent. This paper does not aim to provide an ultimate definition of Europe, or a conclusive statement as to how the EU and Europe are to be distinguished. Rather, the aim here is to highlight one issue of the progress of European integration and the EU-Europe relationship: today, it is mostly through the policies and actions of the EU – the political body – that the integration of Europe – the continent – is advancing. The historian Wolfgang Schmale remarks on the relationship between Europe and the EU that “Europe is more than the EU, but without the EU, it is nothing today.”<sup>3</sup> He states that at present “any process to describe and to define Europe is substantially based on EU-dynamics.”<sup>4</sup> According to Schmale, this tendency could already be observed as early as the 1950s, since the foundation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), but by now it has become irrevocable.<sup>5</sup> This trend can also be seen in the field of cultural heritage, where EU-policies are about to become a dominant element on a European level. Given that the European context actually goes beyond the EU,<sup>6</sup> the key questions of this paper – following an introductory outline of the notion and function of cultural heritage – are: how could ‘European heritage’ be defined, and by which authority?

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

What is cultural heritage? A worldwide acknowledged general definition is that of the *UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972), better known as the World Heritage Convention. It defines cultural heritage as:

Monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;  
Groups of buildings: groups of separate or connected buildings

3. Wolfgang Schmale, *Geschichte und Zukunft der Europäischen Identität* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008), 7

4. Ibid., 7

5. Ibid., 7

6. Consider for example the different numbers of member states of the Council of Europe and the EU: the Council comprises 47, the EU 27 member states.

which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science;

Sites: works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.<sup>7</sup>

7. UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (Paris, 1972), Art. 1.

8. Cf. UNESCO, *Convention on the Protection of Intangible Heritage* (Paris, 2003)

9. "Heritage Days put Europe in Pride of Place", French Embassy in the UK, accessed August 31, 2012, <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Heritage-Days-put-Europe-in-the.html>

10. For a comprehensive overview of the development of heritage conservation, see for example Jukka Jokilehto, *History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2002); on the notion of heritage, see for instance Françoise Choay, *L'Allégorie du Patrimoine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992); a systematic study of the institutionalisation of heritage is provided by Dominique Poulot, *Patrimoine et Musées. L'Institutionnalisation de la Culture* (Paris: Hachette, 2001)

11. Cf. Jean-Pierre Babelon and André Chastel, *La Notion de Patrimoine* (Paris: Editions Liana Levi, 1994), 49f.

While this definition of cultural heritage continues to be valid, the pre-eminence of architectural and archaeological – that is, tangible – elements has lessened since, and today intangible assets are internationally recognised as cultural heritage as well.<sup>8</sup>

As far as the use or function of cultural heritage is concerned, a survey conducted in 2007 in five European countries – France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Finland – revealed that 60% of the interviewed citizens were of the opinion that "having a European cultural heritage 'reinforces the sense of belonging to Europe'."<sup>9</sup> By supporting an individual sense of belonging – that is, identification – with a group or community, the notion of a common heritage contributes to creating a collective identity.

Today, cultural heritage appears to be an indispensable element of group identities worldwide, as for instance for most nation states. How cultural heritage has developed into this role is a long and complex story.<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to underline one particularly important point: the radical changes of land and property tenures in the wake of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, when in countries across Europe large expropriation schemes turned hitherto royal and ecclesiastic properties into common, public property. The understanding of *public* property brought an unprecedented form of *public* consciousness into being: the notion of collective identity.<sup>11</sup> Public space had become public interest. The freshly 'inherited' properties in public ownership were to be

preserved both for their material and immaterial worth, shared by all citizens. Beside their material value, they were understood as testimony of past events, personalities and places. Historical – that is, symbolical – value was attributed to architectural elements, and as a ‘bearer’ of information about the past, built cultural heritage became essential for the education of the collective. This educational intention is especially highlighted when an explanatory plaque is put up at buildings considered historical monuments, for example at No. 5 Rue Payenne in Paris (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. House No. 5, Rue Payenne, Paris (Kerstin Stamm)

Many buildings of heritage value bear no explanatory label, however: they are considered valuable in their existence as such, as the remains of an otherwise intangible but significant past that should be kept alive in contemporary consciousness, and they should therefore be protected and conserved for the sake of public interest. The first article of the *European Convention for the Protection of Archaeological Heritage* acknowledges heritage accordingly as “a source of European collective memory.”<sup>12</sup> It is this understanding of history and its political and social value that is the foundation for the notion of cultural heritage.

With or without an explanatory plaque, heritage conservation means es-

12. Council of Europe, *European Convention for the Protection of Archaeological Heritage* (Malta, 1992), Art. 1



Fig. 2. The European Heritage Label-plaque at the Acropolis, Athens (Kerstin Stamm)

tablishing, describing and documenting the specific value of each heritage asset. This task is usually carried out by the responsible heritage authority, which in most European countries is a national institution. The exact documentation of the heritage value of a monument can be understood as recording – and in a sense permanently fixing one interpretation of – the history of each monument. It can be argued, however, that every such narrative, every history told remains but one out of many possible interpretations, and that in this sense every interpretation could be regarded as an ‘invented’ tradition.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, many communities, and in particular big, territorial ones like the modern nation states, are only ‘imagined’ or intangible in the sense that the community members are not necessarily personally acquainted with each other. Therefore, the cohesion of such a community depends to a significant degree on the abovementioned individual sense of belonging, which is usually transmitted through an image of the community that all its members share, or are at least familiar with. This process of self-imagination of a collective in turn relies to a large extent on the use of symbols and images that the community members can identify with. It is by having this personal identification in common that the individual members form a collective identity, which Benedict Anderson has described as an ‘imagined community’.<sup>14</sup> Because it connects the immaterial symbolism of the imagined community with the tangible, material reality, the concept of cultural heritage constitutes a very powerful symbol to support the notion of a common collective identity.

13. Cf. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

14. Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006)

While the range and type of symbols for this purpose is practically unlimited, their effectiveness essentially depends on their dissemination. Therefore, to transmit the symbols for the shared image of the community, education is an indispensable element of community building. Informing the wider public about those ‘tokens’ of collective identity is essential for the creation of a shared image. If any collective identity built on symbols and images is a construction, the common element within each individual community member therefore must necessarily be understood as the result of education. An emblematic quotation from the nineteenth century highlights this interdependence of collective image and identity and its construction: after the unification of various independent Italian states into the Italian Republic, the Italian statesman Massimo D’Azeglio remarked: “We have created Italy, now we have to create the Italians.”<sup>15</sup> Over a century later Jean Musitelli, the president of the French National Heritage Institute, made a similar point: “European heritage is a fact that is still to be invented.”<sup>16</sup> The European Heritage Label is an extraordinary example of a strategy along those lines. At the same time it illustrates the extent to which the European Union, representing only a part of the European countries, claims the authority to attend to issues pertaining to Europe as a whole, in this case European identity.

## THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE LABEL

In the first half of the year 2005, participants of the Meetings for Europe and Culture<sup>17</sup> initiated an intergovernmental scheme for a European Heritage Label (EHL). The greater context of this meeting is worth noting: it took place shortly before the French and Dutch referenda on the ratification of the *Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe*, a document to advance the European integration. When both national referenda rejected the treaty, the whole ratification process – and with it the process towards a greater European integration – came to a halt for the time being. In the following year, France, Hungary and Spain signed a joint declaration to establish a European Heritage list. This proposal was finally agreed upon by the EU-Member

15. Massimo d’Azeglio, *I miei Ricordi*. (Firenze: Barberà 1883), accessed August 31, 2012, <http://www.barne-sandnoble.com/w/i-miei-ricordi-massimo-d-azeglio/1027637897>, p. 483

16. Jean Musitelli, opening lecture to the 15th edition of the *Entrétiens du patrimoine*, Paris, 19-21 May 2007, on the theme “Patrimoine de l’Europe. Patrimoine Européen?” accessed August 31, 2012, <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/actualites/conferen/donnedieu/edp07.html>

17. Held in Paris, 2-3 May 2005

18. "Heritage Days"

19. "European Heritage Label", Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, accessed August 31, 2012, <http://www.mcu.es/patrimonio/MC/PatrimonioEur/index.html>

20. "European Heritage Label", European Commission Culture, last modified March 16, 2010, accessed August 31, 2012, [http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc2519\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc2519_en.htm)

21. "European Heritage Label", European Commission

22. *Impact Assessment Report: accompanying Document to the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Union Action for the European Heritage Label*, European Commission, (Brussels, 2010), 3, accessed August 31, 2012, [http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/ia\\_carried\\_out/docs/ia\\_2010/sec\\_2010\\_0198\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/governance/impact/ia_carried_out/docs/ia_2010/sec_2010_0198_en.pdf)

23. *The European Heritage Label. Building the future for European Citizens*, Madrid, January 25, 2007, accessed August 31, 2010, <http://www.ugr.es/~ophe/020DOCUMENTACION/016-001a.pdf>

24. Cf. "European Heritage Label", Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport

States in Berlin in February 2007.<sup>18</sup> The first monument granted the European Heritage Label was the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, (Fig. 2) and in March 2007 the first EHL-plaque was put up at Cluny Abbey in Burgundy, France. By the year 2010, there were 68 cultural heritage assets in 19 countries bearing the European Heritage Label.<sup>19</sup>

How does the label relate to European identity? The key motivation for the label was a perceived lack of attachment to the European Union among its citizens,<sup>20</sup> as seemingly confirmed by the double rejection of the abovementioned Constitutional Treaty in the referenda. This lack of attachment to the EU was attributed to a "weak knowledge of European history, the role of the EU and its values";<sup>21</sup> thus it was thought necessary to make European history more tangible in order to enhance European identity. Cultural heritage was perceived as a useful medium through which to achieve this. Hence the principal aim for the EHL was to reinforce the citizens' sense of belonging, but also to support diversity and to enhance intercultural dialogue.<sup>22</sup> As formulated in the introduction to the intergovernmental EHL-initiative, "[the European Heritage Label] aims to strengthen the support of European citizens for a shared European identity and to foster a sense of belonging to a common cultural space."<sup>23</sup> Participation in this non-EU-initiative was voluntary and open to all European countries, irrespective of their EU-membership. So far, 18 EU-member states and Switzerland as a non-EU-member have taken part; other countries, some of which are longstanding members of the European Council or early members of the EU, do not or not yet participate.

What heritage properties are labelled? The present EHL-list covers a time span from as early as the Bronze Age to the twenty-first century. It comprises all types of cultural heritage assets – tangible and intangible, immovable and movable objects. There are monuments, buildings, libraries; but also sites with reference to certain historical events or personalities, sites of religious importance, and various other properties of artistic, scientific and historical value.<sup>24</sup> The great diversity of cultural heritage assets that bear the

European Heritage Label poses a question, however. It was the explicit aim of the EHL to provide an image of one shared European heritage; but how is such a diverse array of heritage, individually selected by each participant in this initiative, to offer a coherent image, a shared symbol for a common European identity?

## CONFLICT OF IMAGES

Without doubt, this diversity of cultural heritage properties represents the many different aspects of what is considered European heritage. However, the *Impact Assessment* of the European Commission criticised the first EHL-list exactly for its disparity. “The reading or interpretation of cultural heritage in Europe, including of the most symbolic sites of our shared heritage, is still to a very large extent a national reading. The European dimension of our common heritage is insufficiently highlighted.”<sup>25</sup> The intergovernmental structure of the first initiative, with each participating state giving its own interpretation of the ‘European-ness’ of its EHL-candidates, was considered the reason for the diverging definitions of European Heritage: “as a consequence of the current selection procedures, the nature of the selected sites [and] their relevance [...] are rather disparate and in some cases difficult to comprehend.”<sup>26</sup> In conclusion, in December 2010 the European Parliament decided to make the intergovernmental initiative an official EU-action, in order to allow the intervention of the European Union.<sup>27</sup> EU involvement in the EHL was expected to improve coordination between member states and thereby to contribute to the development and application of new “common, clear and transparent selection criteria,” as well as “new selection and monitoring procedures” for the EHL, ensuring “the relevance of the sites in the light of the objectives.”<sup>28</sup> The objective of the officialised EHL is now “to enhance the value and profile of sites which have played a key role in the history and the building of the European Union.”<sup>29</sup> The two most often quoted examples in line with this interpretation of European heritage are the house of Robert Schuman, the French statesman who is regarded as

25. *Impact Assessment Report*, 2

26. *Impact Assessment Report*, 2

27. European Parliament, *European Parliament legislative resolution of 16 December 2010 on the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Union action for the European Heritage Label*, accessed August 31, 2012, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:169E:0223:0233:EN:PDF>

28. *Impact Assessment Report*, 3

29. *Impact Assessment Report*, 3



one of the founding fathers of the EU, and the Gdansk shipyards in Poland, birthplace of the Solidarnosc trade union which helped trigger the collapse of communism in Europe.<sup>30</sup> Two other examples with the European Heritage Label recall completely different aspects of European history. The Bradlo Mausoleum in the city of Brezova pod Bradlom, Slovakia, was proposed for the EHL because it “constitutes a symbol of the life and work of Milan Rastislav Štefánik; the monument to his memory forms part of the heritage of democratic Slovakia and represents the Slovak contribution to the creation of modern Europe. Therefore, the Mausoleum of M.R. Štefánik is not only of national significance, but it also has a European dimension.”<sup>31</sup> The second is the museum of the Soviet genocide victims in Vilnius, Lithuania.<sup>32</sup> There is no question that all four examples refer to eminent individuals and significant events in European history; their approval as legitimate elements in a narrative of European identity clearly depends on the perspective, however. The dispute about their being adequate candidates for the label or not reveals the conflict of images of European heritage and identity. The question is, if the dispute has to be resolved, by which authority? An alternative approach could be to ask if this conflict has to be resolved at all: could not the disparity and diversity of images be appreciated as a demonstration of the motto “United in diversity”? Finally, what about cultural heritage in countries that do not participate in the initiative – is it not European heritage? Since the EU became involved, participation in the European Heritage Label remains voluntary, but has now been restricted to member states of the European Union. As a result of the EU intervention, there will be a review of the assets labelled so far to determine whether they meet the new criteria; failure of compliance will result in withdrawal of the Label.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

What is European Heritage, for whom and why? The heritage conservator and art historian Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper put it like this: “If a monument can be used for one identity construction, it can equally be used for another.”<sup>34</sup>

30. Cf. “European Heritage Label”, European Commission Culture

31. “European Heritage Label: Bradlo Mausoleum and the birthplace of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik”, Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, accessed August 31, 2012, [http://www.mcu.es/patrimonio/MC/PatrimonioEur/Red/Eslovaquia\\_CiudadBrezovaBradlom.html](http://www.mcu.es/patrimonio/MC/PatrimonioEur/Red/Eslovaquia_CiudadBrezovaBradlom.html)

32. “European Heritage Label: Museum of Genocide Victims (1940-1941) in Vilnius”, Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, accessed August 31, 2012, [http://www.mcu.es/patrimonio/MC/PatrimonioEur/Red/Lituania\\_MuseoGenocidioVilnius.html](http://www.mcu.es/patrimonio/MC/PatrimonioEur/Red/Lituania_MuseoGenocidioVilnius.html)

33. *Impact Assessment Report*, 8

34. Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper, “Wahr oder falsch? Denkmalpflege als Medium nationaler Identitätskonstruktionen”, in *Bilder gedeuteter Geschichte*, Vol 2, ed. O. G. Oexle et al (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2004), 255

Or, as a journalist of *The Independent* somewhat laconically commented on the EU-reformed EHL: “One man’s coal pit is another one’s symbol for European integration.”<sup>35</sup> While the idea of labelling historical sites in order to highlight them as elements of an imagined heritage – in the way commemorative plaques do – cannot be rejected completely, doubts remain as to whether or not a *single* definition of European heritage could adequately express its inherent diversity. As the first, intergovernmental scheme for the European Heritage Label demonstrated, there is not just one perspective on the interpretation and narration of European history, as symbolised by monuments, sites, places and artefacts. In the light of the uniqueness of the EU – it is neither a continental nation-state, nor a federation of states – EU-policies concerning cultural heritage could in fact aim at other goals than constructing an image of EU-European cultural heritage modelled on that of a national heritage. Rather than trying to unify them under an exclusive label, EU policy makers could employ the various – and contested – interpretations of European heritage as a means to imagine European identity beyond recent EU-history, thus maintaining its unique diversity. Instead of streamlining an enormous variety of interpretations into a single definition, the European Heritage Label could actually serve to highlight the rich diversity of European heritage – and the equally varied images of it.

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